

The Postcolonial Museum

The Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History

Edited by Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro, Università degli Studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale', Italy

This book examines how we can conceive of a 'postcolonial museum' in the contemporary epoch of mass migrations, the internet and digital technologies. The authors consider the museum space, practices and institutions in the light of repressed histories, sounds, voices, images, memories, bodies, expression and cultures. Focusing on the transformation of museums as cultural spaces, rather than physical places, is to propose a living archive formed through creation, participation, production and innovation. The aim is to propose a critical assessment of the museum in the light of those transcultural and global migratory movements that challenge the historical and traditional frames of Occidental thought. This involves a search for new strategies and critical approaches in the fields of museum and heritage studies which will renew and extend understandings of European citizenship and result in an inevitable re-evaluation of the concept of 'modernity' in a so-called globalised and multicultural world.

Long overdue, here is a volume that updates and reconfigures the intersection of postcolonial critique with multiple interpretations of the museum and social praxis in globalisation. The Postcolonial Museum charts gaps, achievements and prospects in 20 chapters that re-interpret the connection of past and current imperialisms. Introducing a wealth of new voices, this is essential reading for anyone interested in curatorial practice and theory, modern and contemporary art, ethnography, museology and the interventionist potential of research in the humanities overall.

Angela Dimitrakaki, University of Edinburgh, UK

Cover image: *The Tomb of Qara Kōz* by Ronni Ahmmed and Ebadur Rahman, Venice Biennale, Lido, 2011. Image courtesy of the artist and the curator, Ebadur Rahman.

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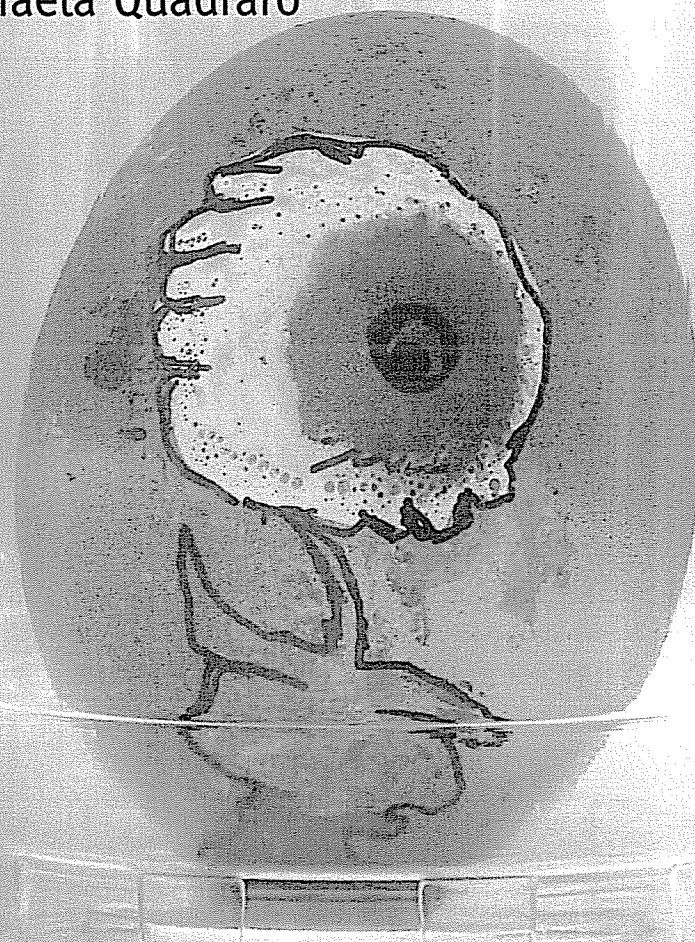
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The research activities developed by the MeLa Project are fostered by the cooperation of nine European Partners, and articulated through distinct Research Fields.

RF01: Museums and Identity in History and Contemporaneity

examines the historical and contemporary relationships between museums, places and identities in Europe and the effects of migrations on museum practices.

RF02: Cultural Memory, Migrating Modernity and Museum Practices

transforms the question of memory into an unfolding cultural and historical problematic, in order to promote new critical and practical perspectives.

RF03: Network of Museums, Libraries and Public Cultural Institutions

investigates coordination strategies between museums, libraries and public cultural institutions in relation to European cultural and scientific heritage, migration and integration.

RF04: Curatorial and Artistic Research

explores the work of artists and curators on and with issues of migration, as well as the role of museums and galleries exhibiting this work and disseminating knowledge.

RF05: Exhibition Design, Technology of Representation and Experimental Actions

investigates and experiments innovative communication tools, ICT potentialities, user centred approaches, and the role of architecture and design for the contemporary museum.

RF06: Envisioning 21st Century Museums

fosters theoretical, methodological and operative contributions to the interpretation of diversities and commonalities within European cultural heritage, and proposes enhanced practices for the mission and design of museums in the contemporary multicultural society.

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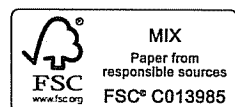
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Introduction: Disruptive Encounters – Museums, Arts and Postcoloniality

Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona
and Michaela Quadraro

Postcolonial art is intimately linked to globalisation – that is, to a critical reflection on the planetary conditions of artistic production, circulation and reception. This implies focusing on the interweaving of the geographical, cultural, historical and economic contexts in which art takes place. The relationship between globalisation and art, as Okwi Enwezor observes, conceived and institutionalised by the European history of modern art in terms of separation or simply negation, here acquires fundamental importance (Enwezor 2003). It represents both the premise through which the relationship between art and the postcolonial can be conceptualised, and the matrix that helps to convey the cultural and political value of this relationship, together with its significance as a *disruptive encounter*. Far from being lost in the sterile and abstract, yet provincial, mirror of self-referentiality masked as universalism – with the implicit claim of the autonomy and independence of art from other cultural forms and activities – postcolonial art is deeply and consciously embedded in historicity, globalisation and social discourse. On one hand, it reminds us of how power is organic to the constitution of the diverse relations and asymmetries that shape our postcolonial world, and hence of how ‘bringing contemporary art into the geopolitical framework that defines global relations offers a perspicacious view of the postcolonial constellation’ (Enwezor 2003, 58). On the other hand, postcolonial art also shows how aesthetics today presents itself as an incisive critical instance. Postcolonial art proposes new paradigms of both signification and subjectivation, offering alternative interpretative tools that promote a reconfiguration of a planetary reality.

Analysing the link between modernity and this global reality, we can say that globalisation can be understood as the planetary ‘expansion of trade and its grip on the totality of natural resources, of human production, in a word of living in its entirety’ (Mbembe 2003). It was inaugurated by the Occident through a violent process of expropriation, appropriation and an exasperated defence of property, spread globally through capitalism and its imperialist extension. This is a political economy that is deeply rooted in, and sustained by, the humanist, rationalist, colonialist and nationalist culture of the West. The central phenomenon of modernity, born in a historical exercise of power, was fed by the religion of ‘progress’ and the racist ideology of ‘white supremacy’ imposing itself for centuries as a universal ontological category through the institutions of laws,

Afterword: After the Museum

Iain Chambers

As the MeLa research project obviously draws on a series of interdisciplinary and transnational approaches in elaborating its critical perspectives, it was highly fitting that the University of Naples 'L'Orientale' should have hosted the conference *The Postcolonial Museum: The Pressures of Memory, the Bodies of History*. The history and development of 'L'Orientale', both in terms of its research and teaching programmes, have been continually shaped by questions of transcultural research and the accompanying need to develop interdisciplinary approaches in registering the diverse and complex formation of the modern world. Here the past, as a linguistic, cultural and historical archive, has consistently been researched in proposing an altogether more critical sense of the present. Looking elsewhere towards extra-European worlds, particularly in Africa and Asia, 'L'Orientale' has consistently sought to establish its critical and academic presence on the threshold between a European inheritance and extra-European histories, cultures and languages.

The work that has been produced in this university and which feeds into the MeLa project encourages us to consider how Europe is placed on an altogether more extensive map: one that is central to its making, but which also exceeds its geographical and cultural confines. This emerging critical space – interdisciplinary? transnational? postcolonial? – is surely what is common to 'L'Orientale' and the ongoing research and concerns of the chapters presented here. It is not by chance that probably the first international conference in Italy on postcolonialism – *The Postcolonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons* – was held at 'L'Orientale' two decades ago.

The rites and rituals of the archival procedures and architectural organisation of the museum produce texts, documents, objects, experiences that are identified, classified, catalogued, explained and interpreted in regimes of knowledge, power and truth. The volume *Cultural Memory, Migrating Modernities and Museum Practices* produced by the MeLa research group in Naples proposed a preliminary critical survey of such historical and cultural procedures.¹

Extending these considerations, I wish very briefly to touch here on two dimensions; the first one is captured in these words from Irit Rogoff:

The old boundaries between making and theorising, historicising and displaying, criticising and affirming have long been eroded. Artistic practice is being

¹ Available online at <http://www.mela-project.eu/publications/949> (accessed 10 November 2013).

acknowledged as the production of knowledge and theoretical and curatorial endeavours have taken on a far more experimental and inventive dimension, both existing in the realm of potentiality and possibility rather than that of exclusively material production. (Rogoff 2003)

To this, I wish to add this reflection from Angela Dimitrakaki:

Representation is an ontological features of the exhibition, which acquires sharper contours in cases of multicultural and multiethnic shows. But as 'authentic' art today tends to be biopolitical, affective and about knowing rather than representing the social, we are also forced to ask: is the exhibition the optimal mode of 'our' encounter with art? (Dimitrakaki 2012)

Without comment, I wish now simply to bring in the second dimension. This consists in considering the context of extra-European temporalities and spaces. Here the modern museum, as a European-derived modality of knowledge and cultural power, has to register the highly charged pertinence of excluded times and spaces to the making of modernity, particularly in the harsh light of the intertwined centralities of colonialism, imperialism and global migrations. At this point, the museum becomes another space: a *heterotopia*, an unsuspected site for the critical diagnoses of the modernity it seeks to exhibit and explain.

The community of time – that is, the seemingly shared time of the narration of the European nation – is here interrupted when other times and constellations of belonging enter the museum. The purpose of the conference leading to this book was to propose a collective investigation and discussion of this emerging space and its critical impact on the museum yet to come. All of this, as Achille Mbembe reminds us, is to transform the archive from a collection of seemingly past affairs and dead matters into a series of vital procedures – that is, into an exercise of living powers and possibilities.² Here the past refuses to pass, it insists on its right to return and to interrogate and ghost the present: this is the troubling debris of the past that exceeds the museum that historically sought to systematise, pacify and ultimately silence this inheritance; in the end, this meant to cancel its contemporary pertinence.

What emerged from two intense days of papers and discussion, and hopefully resonates in the writings in this volume, are a series of prospects that, orbiting around the *power of curating* and the *curating of power*, pose how, why and where to interrupt and disturb such a circular, self-affirming logic. The seemingly flat plane of capital and cultural reproduction is hypothetically confronted with multiple scales of belonging and their mixtures of acceptance, resistance and

refusal. Modernity is not as flat as a map. In a historical moment when all is increasingly monitored – from the local level to the trans-national – we have also to acknowledge that not all is captured and netted by capitalist cultural surveillance. If migrants crossing the field of vision most immediately produce an interrogative shadow, there are also many other, less tangible, manners of deviating and re-working the logic that assumes all can be screwed into place. Resistance to the present neo-liberal phase of capitalist accumulation, played out in multiples scenes and localities, operates with a heterogeneity that consistently challenges the seriality and historicism of the existing curatorial economy.

If the modern curator recognises in this space an ethical interrogation, how are these different powers and potentials to be registered? The 'incurable images' (Elhaik, Chapter 12 of this volume) and the incurable wounds and killing fields of modernity (Mbembe 2001) disrupt the 'neutral' ethnographic masquerade of the curatorial operation. If objects, histories, cultures, people were once wrenched out of their context in order to be put on display and exhibited as European knowledge, today this has to be unwound from its colonial premises and handed back to the world it once presumed to define and own. In the sharp light of the gallery space and the illuminated caption, can the *impossibility* of a healing be exposed? Can the modern museum house what amounts to a historical and ontological cut when its collection and criteria are re-routed through a radically diverse accounting of time and space? Beyond mere adjustment and modification, the museum as a critical space needs to become something more, something else.

To propose a postcolonial museum is therefore to cultivate a historical, cultural and ontological wound. It is, as Ranjana Khanna (2007) argues, a cut that remains incurable. This is to entertain an economy of rupture and becoming that bleeds into the present (Elhaik). Here 'difficult heritages' (Macdonald 2007; Gravano, Chapter 8 of this volume) can never be fully accommodated.³ Despite our resistance, they insist with the demand for a response, *not a resolution*. Opening up holes in time produces spaces in which re-membering resonates precisely with what the institutional archive and its memories cannot house. Between the absolute concentration of the Occidental museum, rendering the world transparent to its will, and the diffusion of the intangible there emerge other horizons of sense. The museum, as a physical and metaphysical site of memory, ultimately poses the interrogation of the very nature of the discursive organisation of knowledge.

The deliberate undoing of any liberal understanding of belonging as a property secured in the dark archive of the mausoleum-museum raises the question of the body politic that is infected (Rahman, Chapter 5 of this volume), and inhabited by uncanny ghosts that dismantle the world and reassemble it from another perspective. Operating with this critical malady, while striving towards a more collective, democratic archive (Berger and Mohr 2010; Leese, Chapter

² Achille Mbembe, *After Post-colonialism: Transnationalism or Essentialism?* – Part 2, video lecture at Tate Modern, London, 1 June 2010, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/after-post-colonialism-transnationalism-or-essentialism-part-2> (accessed 14 April 2013).

³ The notion of 'difficult heritage' was introduced by Sharon Macdonald at the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Archaeology and History Annual Conference in 2007.

17 of this volume), the museum becomes a practice, an event. As a suspended interrogation, the museum can no longer be claimed by a singular history or culture. This leads to a wisdom that comes from losing one's original mind and embarking on other routes, proposing a reasoning that is irreducible to the tyranny of a unique rationalism.

Just to consider how 'objects' might belong both to the former colonised as well as to the colonising power is to delve into questions of property and ownership that are completely over-determined by Occidental jurisdiction and legal practices. In brief, it is to touch the heart of a political economy that *a priori* frames the power of the museum as an Occidental institution. As Françoise Vergès explores the issue, the defeat of the once colonised and contemporary subaltern nevertheless can create lines of flight towards archives without objects to be claimed and possessed. Unexpected entanglements around spaces that are simultaneously geo-physical, cultural and historical – the Indian Ocean and the project for a museum on the island of Réunion, for example – produce a multi-temporal palimpsest. Working with local coordinates, and with a map that does not simply emerge from below, or from the ground up, but is already suspended in multiple temporalities, histories and cultural fluxes and flows, is to step outside the linearity of both the Euro-museum and the ethnographic confines of an 'authentic' local folk culture. This means refusing the linearity of 'progress', and abandoning futile attempts to 'catch up' with modernity. It means proposing another cultural matrix in which 'absence is not a lack' (Vergès, Chapter 1 of this volume). Absence, not as a lack, but as an interrogation, produces a slash in the temporal-spatial coordinates of an imposed History.

Then there is the indifference of the site and the setting. The humanist paradigm can be refused by responding to other measures drawn from the climate, the soil, the chemistry of life, that refuse to be readily indexed and mastered. This leads to critical reflection on the limitless drive of capitalism and colonialism when South–South affinities break-up the North–South links. To refuse to be bonded in a 'victimhood' imposed by the predatory economy that carries the name of Occidental humanism is to take life beyond anthropomorphism into another location, beyond representation and a subject-centred ontology (Biemann, Chapter 16 of this volume).

On this threshold, we recognise the signal of the limits of representation and the announcement of the post-human (Gauthier and La Cour, Chapter 18 of this volume). This is an ecology of matter that matters. From personal machinery to the open and frayed networked fabric of the planet, we are pushed beyond the merely technical and its humanist intent. Collecting errors as a counter-image of our will to power provokes other practices that challenge the assumed algorithms of our lives. Dismantling history and exposing it to the infections of the world is to undo the Kantian pact that guarantees the sovereignty of the Occidental subject and the critical distance between a stable, accumulative authority and the inert objects of its aesthetics and knowledge. When others refuse to be othered, the exhibitionary machinery of knowledge finally begins to stutter in the violent circuits of a moribund narcissism.

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